

On Becoming An Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People

By Anne Bishop
(Zed Books, 2001, Second Edition)

Anne Bishop is an anti-racism trainer and popular educator from Nova Scotia who felt inspired to write this book out of concern for “how many people, deeply engaged in the liberation of their own group, seemed not to be able to see their role in oppressing others, and how that comes full circle and perpetuates their own oppression.”

She has succeeded in creating a guidebook for would-be allies, underscoring the complimentary processes of both becoming aware of one’s own oppression and one’s possible roles in being an oppressor of others.

Originally written in 1994, *On Becoming An Ally* was significantly overhauled in 2001. It follows Bishop’s six steps involved in becoming an ally:

1. Understanding oppression, how it came about, how it is held in place and how it stamps its pattern on the individuals and institutions that continually recreate it.
2. Understanding different oppressions, how they are similar, how they differ, how they reinforce one another.
3. Consciousness and healing
4. Becoming a worker for your own liberation
5. Becoming an ally
6. Maintaining hope

Bishop immediately rejects the notion that there is a hierarchy of oppression. Oppressions work as an interconnecting web, reinforcing one another. “All oppressions are interdependent, they all come from the same world-view, and none can be solved in isolation.”

Bishop neatly summarizes several historical examples of how societies organized around competition, domination and private wealth accumulation conquered societies organized around cooperation, nonviolence and relative equality. Racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression were integral parts of in these conquests.

At the historical root of modern oppressions are “power-over” elites who take over other societies and expropriate and accumulate, for their own use,



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resources that were formerly used to maintain life, community, and culture for all or most of the population. "This is how class functions," observes Bishop. "Class is both the result and the foundation of all other forms of oppression." This doesn't mean class is more important to address than other forms of oppression, but part of what holds the whole system together .

The present form of this class domination takes the form of transnational corporations and financial elites. For elites to successfully rule, they must actively keep the web of oppressions working and dividing people. Injustice is maintained through the threat of violence and the dissemination of destructive myths about superiority.

Bishop's assumption is that no one chooses to be an oppressor, but for most people "we do so unconsciously out of our scars." While there are vast differences in the levels of oppression people have faced, almost everyone has some experience of being in both the roles of oppressed and oppressor. We must draw on the insights of both experiences to truly step out of the domination worldview.

To understand different forms of oppression, Bishop's second step, requires a deep exploration of difference. It means understanding invisible and visible forms of difference and the varied histories of diverse peoples. In addition to looking at difference, it is important to appreciate the similar ways in which oppression operates through power and hierarchy, stereotyping, violence, assumptions/slurs about sexuality, and the desire to separate and distinguish.

Lessons for Allies

The heart of the book is Bishop's thoughts on becoming an ally. Learning about your self as oppressor is not easy because, by definition, some of the information we need to overcome the role is hidden from us. "Part of the process of becoming a member of an oppressor group is to be cut off from the ability to identify with the experience of the oppressed."

Bishop contrasts the ally process with the very different experience of learning about one's own liberation. While facing your own oppression is painful, the experience can also "release a great deal of energy and propel the process forward." There is bonding with others, overcoming fears, finding pride, and solidarity. The process of coming to grips with your role as

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an oppressor, however,

...involves accepting your inheritance of a shameful and evil past. There is guilt, that useless and draining non-emotion. There is always that unsettling knowledge that you cannot see what is going on as clearly as the oppressed group can.

This book has some very useful lists and concrete advice. We recommend reading it to absorb Bishop's reflections. Some of her suggestions for would-be allies include:

#1. Be a worker in your own liberation struggle, whatever it is.

#7 Count your privileges; keep a list. Help others see them. Break the

invisibility of privilege.

#13 Learn everything you can about the oppression –read, ask questions,

listen. Your ignorance is part of the oppression.

Bishop admits the pitfalls in offering advice on becoming an ally because for each guideline she suggests, she can remember a time when the advice would be misleading. Some of her guidelines might even seem contradictory because

...the essence of the path to becoming an ally is balance and clarity. One must balance patience and confrontation, flexibility and limits, boundaries and allowances, learning and opinion, humility and self-confidence, your own oppression and others' struggles. Clarity comes from observation, reflection, and analysis in a specific situation.

When Bishop exhorts us to maintain hope, she doesn't mean syrupy comfort. Rather it is an affirmative expectation of change. People change, heal and grow and institutions change. "It does not even require a new generation, raised differently, to see change in a society." As Bishop concludes: "Our recovery of hope –full-colour, three-dimensional, hard working, clear-thinking, wildly radical, living hope –is our key to liberation."

